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Title A Review of the Dust Jacket and the First Two Pages

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Abstract Review of *Nauvoo Polygamy: “. . . but we called it celestial marriage”* (2008), by George D. Smith.

A REVIEW OF THE DUST JACKET AND THE FIRST TWO PAGES

Robert B. White

Review of George D. Smith. *Nauvoo Polygamy: “. . . but we called it celestial marriage.”* Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2008. xix + 672 pp., with bibliography, appendixes, and index. \$39.95.

A great advantage of reading a book review is that one is assisted in choosing whether a book is worth its price and the time required to read it. A disadvantage of many book reviews, however, is that they run to such length that one often is obliged to have already read a great deal before making the critical decisions about whether to part with his money and then his time.

Bearing that in mind, readers will be relieved to learn at the outset that this review is only just over four pages long. That will be sufficient to adequately inform a prospective purchaser or reader about whether to buy and read this book, or to do something else, such as clean the garage. Furthermore, I say “the dust jacket and the first two pages” rather than “*only* the dust jacket and the first two pages” because the whole book can be assessed from just those. One cannot, of course, assume that this book just misses being judged by its cover alone because the author didn’t try his best. Simply put, however, he nevertheless did not do well, and he received no evident assistance from his editors (who work for him).

Although the book is accordingly longer than is necessary for the purposes that are so quickly evident, the author must be congratulated

for his obvious understanding of the need for brevity and for his willingness to accommodate it. There is an obvious and genuine attempt to compact the text by using the ellipsis a great deal. Although the choice to make abundant use of this mark of punctuation is favored by a certain class of historian in order to obscure what was actually said by someone, or because the full contents of a document do not suit the writer's purpose, the plentiful use of the ellipsis here was clearly meant for the reader's benefit. That is obvious, because without an abundance of ellipses the volume would have been bulked up by setting out entire documents, or at the very least entire paragraphs from some of them, and although this is considered an important way to align a work more closely with the facts, this author has recognized that it does require space; and when paper and ink and the reader's available time are at a premium, something has to be sacrificed. Regrettably, the author's thoughtful consideration of the time and means of the reading public has been lost on another reviewer, whose work supplies complete rather than edited quotations of primary sources, and who goes so far as to put them into their historical context. In doing this, the other reviewer, who is admirable in all other ways, has produced a long review, completely defeating the efforts and purposes of the author and editors, and gives no credit to their obvious anxiety to spare the public an expensive and thick volume. While that review is otherwise highly commendable and deserves to be read in full, it misses the point of the editorial decisions to include enough fragmentary material in the book to ensure titillation but not so much as to demand information. After all, if readers are going to insist on full or contextual use of primary sources, they can look them up themselves. A publisher cannot perennially pander to those obsessed with having books cluttered and bulked up with the actual documents or their historical setting.

So, with all that said, here is my review of the dust jacket and the first two pages.

The dust jacket fairly and frankly advises the readers that they "can judge for themselves as they and the author retrace the steps of the Mormon prophet" through places where "rumors and disclo-

tures” apparently abound. How true, and how fair of Signature Books to say so. This encouragement not to take George D. Smith’s *Nauvoo Polygamy* and its “rumors and disclosures” at face value is a welcome departure from the practice of some publishers to tout their wares as accurate, documented, seminal works that now set the standard for any treatment of the subject. This world needs more publishers with the candor thus demonstrated by Signature Books. It is to be hoped that no one will ever handle a copy of *Nauvoo Polygamy* without first ensuring that the dust jacket is attached and has been read.

Now for the book itself. The first two pages come close to being a great read—although they are jumbled up with references to Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt and excerpts from a letter by the emperor that the author appears to believe may have been plagiarized by Joseph Smith, the book’s protagonist. The locale is somewhere in the woods outside Nauvoo. We are informed that Joseph Smith is hiding from due process of law (the author, as part of his commendable surrender to brevity, saves us the bother of telling us that the law in question is in the person of some hate-filled folks from Missouri who still hold grudges and have come to kidnap Joseph and haul him back to the dungeon in Liberty). We eventually learn that he is holed up in the back room of a log cabin belonging to friends and that care must be taken when visiting him so that the chaps from Missouri won’t follow anyone there. From deep in the woods, he sends a letter to young Sarah, whom he has recently married as a plural wife (hence documenting at once the reference in the title to polygamy), telling her that it is God’s will that she come and comfort him because of his strong feelings for her. “Now is the time to afford me succor,” he writes, and adds that he has a room entirely to himself for the purpose. “Come,” he writes, “come and see me in my lonely retreat” out in the bush. At night! Now, there’s the making of an arresting beginning!

A sprinkling of ellipses informs us that we have not been burdened by the entire text of the letter; but on this occasion it is not only to save space, paper, ink, and time—more importantly, it is to protect the reputation of Joseph Smith. (With so many books being written in an effort to debase Joseph’s character, an author as protective of

Joseph's reputation as is this one must be commended.) You see, the entire letter is addressed not only to Sarah, but to Sarah's parents as well; and Joseph asks that Mom and Dad come along to the nocturnal tryst. Well, one can see right away that this would have reflected poorly on Joseph's sophistication because it would portray Joseph Smith as something of a klutz in the steamy midnight romancing field. One can imagine the enthusiasm with which those hostile to the Prophet would poke fun at yet another proof that Joseph was only a dumb yokel after all. Worse, because Joseph occupied only a single room, when all the sweating and moaning the book leads us to assume was to be going on, there wouldn't have been much room for Mom and Dad to stand around, let alone sit down to play a game of crib. The author thus conceals the revelation that Joseph was impractical and inconsiderate of older people.

Obviously, then, the author is biased and will stop at nothing, not even the removal of pertinent parts of paragraphs and sentences from the first document cited, to make his case about Joseph Smith. After all, if we can't get past page 2 without the excision of large portions of a letter that, quoted in its entirety, would reveal Joseph's ignorance of the needs of carnality, what, then, can we hope in the way of objectivity from the rest of the book? Having read it, I can tell you: we can hope for none. George Smith and his press have made their bias clear to any erudite reader in the first two pages (and we were, after all, fairly warned in the dust jacket); and the many, many other pages, even littered as they are with an abundance of doubtless well-meaning ellipses, do nothing to redeem the beginning. We are fortunate that in his efforts to portray Joseph Smith in the way intended, the author has made his bias and methodology so immediately transparent. But, as I said, he doubtless did his best.

Well, that's about enough information to let you know if you should shell out your book budget for the author's egregious efforts in the expectation of reading anything accurate or unbiased. I know that if you don't buy a copy, it might hurt Signature's revenues (they must be getting strapped for money when the publisher writes his own

books—any suggestion that instead it is because he has some sort of agenda doesn't bear thinking about); but better them than you.

I hope you like this review. I wish I'd read something like it before I read the book. You see, my garage still needs cleaning.